

## White Sands remembers the crew of STS-107

Employees of the NASA White Sands Test Facility, Las Cruces, N.M., attended a televised memorial service for the seven astronauts who died during Space Shuttle *Columbia*'s reentry into the earth's atmosphere. The employees watched while NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe and President George W. Bush comforted the grieving family members during the Feb. 4 memorial service at Johnson Space Center. WSTF is a component of JSC and conducts tests on rocket propulsion systems and materials for the space program.

"We are a great team; we are part of the NASA family," said Joseph Fries, NASA Manager of WSTF and of White Sands Space Harbor (WSSH), to the employees. "We must first take time to grieve for our recent loss, then we must continue to do the work that we know how to do so well with a renewed vigor and without the fear of failure."

For more than 20 years, the test facility and its outlying WSSH have conducted astronaut training in the critical phase of final approach and landing of the shuttle orbiter. The WSSH site, located in the alkali flats portion of the U.S. Army White Sands Missile Range near Holloman Air Force Base, has two 7-mile laser-leveled runways made of compacted gypsum, which simulate the landing strips at Kennedy Space Center in Florida and Edwards Air Force Base in California. The approach and landing training flights are conducted using the NASA Shuttle Training Aircraft (STA), which are Grumman Gulfstream corporate jets specially modified to mimic the flight dynamics of the much larger shuttle orbiter.

"During the training flights, the pilots and commanders aboard the STA are in constant radio contact with the traffic advisors at WSSH," said Robert Mitchell, NASA/WSSH. "Our traffic advisors know that the astronauts would always politely thank them, even for the smallest effort. Personally knowing a couple of the astronauts from the Space Shuttle *Columbia* makes this tragedy much more difficult for us."

STS-107 Pilot Willie McCool and Mission Specialist Laurel Clark visited WSTF just three years ago for the WSSH Friends & Family Day and addressed the employees. "Willie was especially patient and helpful in setting up the day's agenda," Mitchell said. After the astronauts described their mission training and experiences, they answered a multitude of questions from the audience. McCool and Clark also attended the Appreciation Day for the El Paso Forward Operations and WSSH employees, held at the NASA Hanger in El Paso, Texas in 2002.

"Their deaths are a terrible thing," said Skip Rasmussen, Honeywell Technology Solutions Inc. (HTSI), a traffic advisor at the WSSH tower. Rasmussen sent a condolence message on behalf of the WSSH crew: "It is a tragic loss when we lose any of our astronauts," the message reads. "However, when we have personally met these people, had lunch with them, discussed the profession with them and laughed with them, the tragedy goes much deeper. Our hopes and prayers go out to their families that they may make it through this time of grief."

"I feel a sadness for the astronauts' families and friends," said HTSI Program Manager Mark Leifeste. "Many of the astronauts trained at WSSH. I feel that we should cherish our relationships more today and not wait until something happens to make our feelings known. I believe that everyone here will do his or her part to make every difference they can, at a personal level, by continuing to do the work we do so well."

The seven brave astronauts who paid the ultimate price in the service of science and the betterment of all mankind are in the thoughts and prayers of all the NASA White Sands employees as they and the rest of the nation move forward from this tragedy. ♦



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**Above: At the White Sands Space Harbor Friends and Family Day three years ago, STS-107 Pilot Willie McCool signed an autograph for a young space enthusiast. McCool attended the event with Mission Specialist Laurel Clark.**

**Below: After having capped off STS-3 with a landing at White Sands – the first and only landing there – *Columbia* flew back to Kennedy Space Center aboard the Shuttle Carrier Aircraft.**



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